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# HOUSEWORK, HOUSEWIVES, AND DOMESTIC WORKERS

## Twentieth-Century Dilemmas of Domesticity

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**ABSTRACT** This article sets established historical narratives of a mid-twentieth-century turn to privacy, new domestic identities, and new ways of thinking about housework into a broader history of domestic service. I argue that the new forms of domesticity were only ever partially and unevenly established in middle-class households. Domestic service emerges as a tenacious institution, which continued to be influential in the organization of middle-class or privileged homes throughout the mid- to late twentieth century. Middle-class women were exhorted to manage their homes without servants, and were offered the consolation of greater privacy and intimacy within their homes, as well as

**the dignity and emotional rewards of a housewife identity. But few found that this made the prospect of being "servantless" attractive. I will therefore examine the failures of the "servantless" home and the "strange survival" of domestic service in twentieth-century Britain.**

KEYWORDS: servant, domestic service, housework, housewife, modernity, middle-class, char, servantless,

## INTRODUCTION

British homes in the twentieth century have been widely understood as sites of deep social change, reflective of attempts to cultivate self-consciously modern lifestyles. Though the timing is contested, historians assert that the rise of a more individualistic society has led to a premium being placed on new formulations of domesticity in modern Britain. "Home" became a key site of material and emotional investment, leisure, and consumption, though this shift was highly dependent on socioeconomic status for its timing. The built environment and its associated domestic technologies were slowly and unevenly transformed, but had the potential to change the domestic setting from a place of hard toil for servants or family members to one of relative ease, comfort, and security. New "labor-saving" devices, the construction of many thousands of new homes in suburban estates, and the smaller numbers of children born to British couples meant that the overcrowding and drudgery of earlier home life was reduced. An increasingly "nuclear" family became an emotional and aspirational focal point. Judy Giles has influentially termed this the formation of a "domestic modernity," dating from the interwar period (Giles 2004). Claire Langhamer's account of the meanings attached to "home" also points to the rise of aspirations to domestic security and privacy from the 1930s, as the material environment and demographic trends began to engender and reflect a distinct, mid-twentieth-century form of domesticity (Langhamer 2005). Though Langhamer acknowledges the limitations to this social trend and the persistence of older forms of living, she nonetheless points to the widely shared aspiration to such lifestyles amongst both men and women, and across the classes.[1]

This mid-twentieth-century modern domesticity is widely assumed to be free from the taint of domestic service, as servant-keeping was perceived as becoming residual and anachronistic. Domestic service was an institution that almost all early- to mid-twentieth-century British families would have had some link to or experience of, and which remained the most common of all entry-level jobs available to young women until World War Two.[2] Nonetheless, it was regarded as a sector in crisis, challenged by the heavy demands employers typically

placed upon their mostly female servants. As early as 1891, it was argued by Amy Bulley, a suffragist writing in the *Westminster Review,* that "[d]omestic service, as it has existed hitherto, is a survival from a social state of things which has passed away, and, being now an anomaly, it is disappearing with as much rapidity as may be" (Bulley 1891: 182). As Selina Todd has shown in her study of the first half of the twentieth century, younger working-class women had long preferred to take other employment if it was available, in manufacturing or retail, and had their own aspirations to domestic privacy and comfort (Todd 2005).

However, this residualization narrative overly stresses discontinuity and does not acknowledge the extent to which the institutions of domestic service remained intimately bound up with the changes in British domesticity in the twentieth century. It will be argued that the distinctive twentieth-century norms of domestic privacy and middle-class modernity developed in ways that were compatible with servant-keeping. I outline a fluctuating rather than declining trajectory for domestic service in the twentieth century, and thus account for the ease with which it was reintegrated into the service sector in the 1980s.

Domestic service was an institution that was key to establishing claims to identities of privilege, entitlement, and status, claims that were repeatedly made in rhetorical texts as well as being sustained through practices of domesticity. The sources examined here are those that reflect the presentation of the "servant problem" in domestic advice literature, the periodical and newspaper press, in government reports, and in polemical literature. They are chosen to represent the very diverse ways in which servant-keeping was discussed within twentieth-century Britain in ways that went beyond its significance as a sector of the labor market, to become a means of debating and delineating social hierarchies. Despite its ambiguities, servant-keeping was one of the most important ways in which privileged women attempted to rework and stabilize their identities and situate their relationship to domesticity. It is beyond the scope of this article to survey fully the diverse practices in British households; in what follows, the norms and prescriptive ideals that circulated are explored, and juxtaposed with some case studies of everyday domestic organization.

The main focus here is on the persistence of domestic service in establishing claims to what can broadly be seen as a "middle-class" identity, though there is a skew in public discourses towards the more affluent middle classes, whose lifestyles often provided an aspirational template for the less well-off. The lower middle classes tended to be relatively silent or unrepresented within domestic advice literature and public debates on the "servant question." However, "middle-classness" is not an easy category to work with at a historical distance. It was a vague and mutable identity, and highly internally

factionalized—Alison Light has described it as an unstable identity, depending "on an extremely anxious production of endless discriminations between people who are constantly assessing each other's standing" (Light 1991: 13). The range of terms used to indicate "middle-classness" (civilized, educated, modern, forward-looking, delicate, etc.) suggests a constellation of qualities that cannot be easily amalgamated. Middle-class identity has been seen as becoming more united by the political and industrial threat of organized labor in interwar Britain, and thus a more coherent and politically effective category (McKibbin 1998: 46–9). However, class privilege is understood in what follows as untethered from any particular political or economic interest, and rather functions (as it was used by many early- to mid-twentieth-century historical actors) as a means of referring to positions of advantage set up through the interacting privileges of age, ethnicity, income, cultural capital, and gender. In any case, servant-keeping did not always align closely with middle- or upper-class identity, since some working-class households employed domestic workers, and many lower- and middle-middle-class households did not. The lack of consistency in the domestic practices of the middle classes, indeed, is another reason for being wary of allowing class to be too prominent in defining the complex of privileged status that was indicated by references to domestic service.

## LATE-VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN DOMESTICITY

One of the key factors understood as making domestic service obsolete in the twentieth century has been the rise of a more individualistic and privatized domestic realm, in which servants became intrusive. This social and emotional change, however, has tended to be historically mobile, identified with many periods. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall's scholarship has proved highly influential in linking new kinds of more private domestic relationships to the rise of middle-class identities, allied to new ways of organizing gender (Davidoff and Hall 1987). The authors argued that a new sense of privacy became evident from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in the adoption of halls, corridors, garden boundaries, and so on, as well as in new practices of segregating servants away from the families they served. As an ideal, domestic privacy became reflected in advice literature, and by the late nineteenth century was also referenced and asserted in municipal regulation of housing and other government initiatives. As the professions expanded, middle-class lifestyles were pursued by larger numbers, supported by the individualistic ideologies of self-reliance, aspirations for one's children, and an intensely inward-looking familial culture, evident in Victorian advice literature.

These discourses of privacy were particularly resonant amongst those disparate groups loosely described as lower middle class. This was a group that was hard to identity with clarity, though its members became more socially and culturally prominent at the end of the

nineteenth century. The upwardly aspirational clerks, shopkeepers, and small-scale entrepreneurs were culturally represented by the comic suburban Charles Pooter (Grossmith and Grossmith 2008). Ludicrous, vulgar, pompous yet warm-hearted and loyal to his family, Pooter epitomized the inward-looking, home-centered villa-dweller (Crossick 1977; Hammerton 1991). Many such families might have been able to afford a young general servant, or an older "daily," particularly before World War One, but housework and childcare also might be undertaken at home by family members.[3] Housekeeping manuals began to argue that there was pleasure and dignity for lower-middle-class women in looking after their own houses, and periodical publishers began explicitly to target those now named "housewives."[4]

There were, however, limits set to what was acceptable to "do for oneself," particularly for the upper middle classes. At the turn of the century, the domestic advice writer Mrs Panton, for example, allowed that certain "dainty" tasks were acceptable—washing china and glassware, laying the table, mending socks, and retrimming hats (Panton 1898). The work characterized as "the rough"—scrubbing floors, heavy cleaning of boots, knives and pans, was still widely expected to be done by servants or chars even in lower-middle-class homes. With few markers of social, educational, or cultural difference from their servants, the lower middle classes had a tenuous, uncomfortable relationship with domestic workers. Though the Pooters were depicted as servant keepers, their failures of management of their maid were part of their comic appeal. More polemical sources were directly scathing about "mistresshood" in the suburbs. The journalist Charles Masterman wrote derisively of suburban "women, with their single domestic servants, now so hard to get, and so exacting when found, [who] find time hang rather heavy on their hands" (Masterman 1960[1909]: 69). The servantless state was presented as more dignified, avoiding the pretentious and unstable identity of "mistress."

Across the social spectrum of "middle-classness," mistresshood was increasingly more likely to be associated with parasitism or arbitrary forms of authority. The upper-middle-class Gwen Raverat insightfully noted that as an Edwardian young woman: "Of course I disapproved of having servants on principle, even when they were treated with affection and respect, as ours were at home" (Raverat 1952: 49). Social commentators began cautiously to envisage less traditional domestic arrangements that might be appealing to all. In 1913, Mrs Frazer, wife of an eminent Cambridge anthropologist, published an account of living without servants, titled *First Aid to the Servantless*, which foregrounded the ideal home as a realm of privacy. She described the maid lurking during "domestic squabbles," watching "her employers as a cat watches mice" (Frazer 1913: 2). The servant's role gave her inappropriate knowledge and power within the private confines of the home. The need to keep up appearances was too demanding: "Whether the staff consists of 2, 3 or 7, the owner has

to live up (or down) to the staff's idea of what is the proper conduct of a house." The author dwelt on a sentimental vision of the middle-class housewife washing up (which significantly had been relocated from the kitchen to the more acceptable space of the dining room): "It formed quite a picture, reminding one of some old Dutch painter, to see the pretty young woman with her deft fingers, handing the bright plate out of the porcelain jar …" (Frazer 1913: 19).

The depiction of the cheerless, tense servant-keeping household and the calm, ordered household run by the housewife resonated across the Edwardian political spectrum. Conservative figures had long bemoaned the "idle luxury" associated with the mistress role, and idealized earlier models of domestic femininity. There were few signs that in practice the rhetorical celebration of housewives translated into a preference for servantless living, or any significant attempt to exclude "outsiders" from affluent homes. Mrs Frazer's vision of "the servantless" was still mildly comic, rather than seriously reformist. Gwen Raverat acknowledged with honesty that her disapproval of servant-keeping "was just an abstract theory; for I had never considered in the least how we should get on without them; in fact it seemed to me quite inevitable that they should be there, a necessary and very tolerable arrangement, both for them and for us" (Raverat 1952: 49). Indeed, the *Domestic Servants' Advertiser* noted in 1913 the *rising* numbers of "people who twenty years ago would have done all the housework themselves now wishing to keep a maid to help them in the work." There was strong social pressure on the professional classes to incorporate formal social institutions such as "calling," "at homes," and late dinners, and as a result, "more people keep maids than was formerly the case" (*Domestic Servants' Advertiser* June 24, 1913).[5] Though middle-class women were offered "home-centered" identities, these rarely named or described domestic labor. The threepenny periodical *Hearth and Home*, for example, was aimed at late Victorian and Edwardian "gentlewomen," and might be thought to speak to their domestic interests. But its content was focused upon society gossip, beauty advice, and light fiction. There was very little that might suggest an involvement in domestic affairs, even though it was aimed at a lower- to middle-middle-class readership. By the visual imagery of advertisements, and by articles discussing aspects of servant-keeping, its readers were clearly addressed as mistresses rather than housewives.

Early efforts at servantless living were only partially realized, and were undertaken with great trepidation. The novelists Mary and Jane Findlater lived briefly "without servants" in Scotland, during World War One, and wrote a memoir of their experiences—*Content with Flies*. They experienced intense anxiety at the prospect of two months without help: "[W]e were like unaccustomed swimmers suddenly thrown into deep water. All must now depend upon our own energy; there was no one to be appealed to for any help" (Findlater and Findlater 1916: 24).

The context of war was significant in making this experiment feasible and less damaging to social status; the Findlater sisters portrayed it as a contribution to the war effort. However, the experiment was made possible by hiring a largely unacknowledged daily domestic help to deal with the fires, washing up, and cleaning boots. For all the rhetoric of crisis in servant-keeping, "doing for oneself" seemed neither feasible nor attractive to many better-off Edwardian householders, and only those "delicate" tasks, which would not leave the traces of physical labor on the hands, were deemed suitable for the mistress.

## INTERWAR DOMESTICITIES

The higher taxation and inflation brought by World War One made servant-keeping prohibitive for many during and just after the war. The employment of residential servants became confined to fewer families, and this created a great deal of resentment amongst those who had formerly kept residential servants, but were now limited to a single maid or a "daily."[6] The extent of the changes wrought by World War One in female labor markets, however, should not be overstated. Temporarily, it had seemed likely that working-class young women would refuse to return to domestic service, but the economic downturn and coercive state welfare policies did push larger numbers back into private domestic service in certain regional labor markets. A 1923 government report still spoke of domestic service (somewhat unconvincingly) as "the highest privilege of life," and envisaged its renewal in future decades (Wood 1923: 17).

This was a historical moment when middle-class owner occupation increased, and growing use of marriage bars meant that married women were more firmly located within the domestic realm. In such settings, the idealization of domestic privacy seemed even stronger, perhaps in response to the early-twentieth-century traumas of war and economic uncertainty. Servants were increasingly likely to be described with ambivalence or dislike. J. B. Priestley commented that "[i]t is terrible to live under the same roof with people who would appear to resent your very existence, to hate the very sight of you" (Priestley 1927: 429). A mistress writing to *The Times* in 1929 noted that "[a]lthough some of us can live with people quite contentedly, not many of us choose to do so" (Craig 1929). There was a stronger sense of servants as neither kin nor friends, but as professional workers. The homes of both lower- and upper-middle-class groups were smaller and less spatially segregated in the interwar period. This largely made for greater friction between employer and servant, as well as, on occasion, opportunities for informal shared work and friendship.

Under these conditions, domestic service was widely described as "doomed" or obsolete. Magazines and newspapers debated servantless living and offered new representations of housewife identities for middle-class women. Interwar domestic advice writers began to rework the status and practices of housework and thus make

"servantless" lifestyles attractive. Housework was widely rebranded as "homecraft," and new discourses of modernity began to be more firmly associated with certain ways of working in the home. Talk of science and engineering had long been associated with reforming the home, and began to be more prominent in domestic advice literature. The domestic efficiency movement was led by the American publicist, Christine Frederick (Frederick 1915; Rutherford 2003). Frederick herself was ambivalent about domestic service, and unwilling to rule it out, but her time and motion studies of housework lent themselves to those promoting new domestic regimes. *Good Housekeeping*, a new glossy women's magazine that epitomized "modern" forms of domestic organization, concluded emphatically in its first British issue that the modern, labor-saving methods would enable "the educated classes to be independent of domestic help" (*Good Housekeeping* March 1922: 11). Its pages projected an ideal, educated housewife whose work was scientifically informed

> A complete revolution appears to have occurred in modern housekeeping. The young wife is up-to-date in her knowledge of food values and bases her selection of food on their vitamin properties. She makes her own calorie chart. The day's shopping (done by car) provides an amusing theme for conversation during the evening … (*Good Housekeeping* 1930: 280)

New domestic products had become more visible in most British homes after World War One. Hire purchase made appliances more affordable, and shops such as Woolworth's began to provide cheap household goods. A modern interior aesthetic developed, as kitchens began to sport white enamel surfaces, and living rooms, imitation leather. The reduction in clutter and in the ornamentation of furniture made rooms and objects easier to clean (Graves and Hodge 2006: 137–9). Middle-class homes varied dramatically in their purchase of appliances, and major appliances were still out of the reach of many. But small ones spread rapidly, to middle-class and more affluent working-class homes. By 1939, there were 6.5 million electric irons in British homes (Forty 1986: 200).

There was no abrupt transformation of housework in the early to mid-twentieth century, but an easing of some of its physical drudgery. Nonetheless, middle-class women were still presented with an irresolvable diversity of identity options. While some did newly see themselves as domestically competent, maternal, and thrifty, there were many other possible ways of identifying middle-class femininity. Middle-class women were encouraged to think of themselves variously as the leisured guardians of civilized culture, as a bulwark against national decline and population loss, or as making a civic, professional, or intellectual contribution to British national life. The factors associated by some historians with domestic modernity, such

as smaller families and labor-saving devices, also lent themselves equally to these competing varieties of middle-class femininity, options in which servant-keeping was still seen as essential.

Many interwar commentators argued that individual, national, or cultural damage would result from the decline of domestic service. Despite the hard physical labor many middle-class women had undertaken during World War One, a regular writer in *The Queen*, Mrs Peel, was influenced by eugenic concerns in 1919 when she declared: "The middle-class woman with a family cannot solve the question by becoming her own servant. The care of her children, the cooking and serving of meals, and the cleaning of the house are more than she can undertake without detriment to health" (Peel 1919: 368). The concerns for middle-class health and fertility were long-lasting, and many equated "servantless" pejoratively with "childless" throughout the mid-twentieth century (Black 1918: 14; Markham and Hancock 1944: 8, 18).

Concerns over the maintenance of "cultured" or "civilized" lifestyles were also widely discussed; a 1949 survey of the English middle classes suggested that those seeking cultured and sociable lifestyles might emigrate to Ireland or South Africa (Lewis and Maude 1973[1949]: 214). They insisted that domestic service be perpetuated for the sake of this lifestyle, which they felt had deep national and cultural significance. Even those committed to more modern lifestyles, such as the journalist and cookery writer Geoffrey Boumphrey, were slow to envisage a servantless future. Boumphrey broadcast a series of radio talks in the late 1930s, democratically titled "Your Home and Mine." However, the series still assumed a deep concern amongst listeners over the "servant problem." Remarkably, in his vision of the modern home Boumphrey advocated that the space saved by reducing the kitchen to a minimalist, functionalist cooking area "should be used for a servants' hall or maids' sitting room" (Boumphrey 1938: 161–2). Though it was often imagined as being collectivized and professionalized, domestic service continued to intrude upon celebrations of modern living, and modernists did not repudiate household service, but worked it into their vision.

Other apologists for domestic service argued that its value lay in freeing women up for public service. This view was persistently reflected in the many government reports commissioned between 1914 and 1945, aiming to map out the future of domestic service. Other narratives were available, and during World War Two housewifery had been memorably presented as a form of national service, most memorably in Ruby Grierson's 1940 propaganda film, *They Also Serve*. But other forms of service were still widely envisaged for "educated" women. Violet Markham and Florence Hancock argued in their 1944 report on the future of domestic service commissioned by the Ministry of Labour:

> An educated woman fitted by training and experience to make a real contribution to the national life must, if married, provide primarily for the needs of her household, her husband and her children. If no help is forthcoming in carrying out these duties, inevitably she must discharge them herself. Waste of energy and capacity ensues. (Markham and Hancock 1944: 8)

Many who were deeply committed to seeing middle-class women as "modern" did not therefore see them as abandoning the employment and management of servants. One interwar contributor to *Good Housekeeping*, for example, identified "professional or semi-professional women who are also wives and mothers" as "a class that is essentially modern and rapidly increasing, a most important class because it is forward-looking and is giving the cue to oncoming generations." And this was a class, the author argued, that *must* have domestic servants or face what were termed "tragic" consequences (Eaton 1930: 48).

Those who wrote glowingly of the joys of housework in the 1920s have been read as contributing to the self-consciously "modern" household efficiency movement. But many intended the presentation of domesticity as a skilled, satisfying profession as the best way to ensure that it could continue to be delegated to servants. *Spectator* journalist Ann Pope glorified the "individual home" as "a workshop for the upbringing of good citizens, the harbour from which great expeditions set forth, to which the explorers return to refit for another adventure, and to which they creep back, storm-tossed and battered, to find rest and peace." This modern domesticity was still, however, to be the work of servants rather than mothers or wives (Pope 1925: 8).

Others admitted that the housework undertaken by servants might be drudgery, but this was redeemed by its "national" significance. Indeed, the association of housework with repetitive drudgery could not be laid to rest, and continued powerfully to disrupt the various attempts to dignify it. Despite the commitment of *Good Housekeeping* to domestic efficiency and the pleasures of housework, it published the views of Violet Bonham Carter, daughter of former Prime Minister Henry Asquith, in 1923. She argued that middle-class women "grudge spending time and energy on anything so dull [as housework]. Servants liberate us. By standing like buffers between us and the leaden routine of daily drudgery they endow our lives with freedom, spaciousness and scope" (Carter 1923: 11). Feminist writers echoed this assessment, even amongst those from a very different social and political background to Bonham Carter. The socialist feminist Clementina Black was scathing about the effect servantless living would have on middle-class women in her 1918 *A New Way of Housekeeping*.

The identity of "mistresshood" or other euphemisms such as "hostess" and "housekeeper" were still widely offered to the readers of domestic magazines such as *Good Housekeeping*. Few interwar articles

spoke for or to the housewife. For those who could not find servants, or could not afford them, genteel status might be preserved by talk of the "housemistress," rather than "housewife" (Caia 1922). The households of "only moderate needs," described in 1934 by Helen de Guerry Simpson's *The Happy Housewife*, were still assumed to employ a cook, general servant, and a char; she also advised that in a medium-sized house, a male gardener-chauffeur should be employed (Simpson 1934). The housewife, in this case, was simply a servant-keeping mistress. *Good Housekeeping* continued to run features in the 1930s advising readers on "The Law of Master and Servant," or "Training a General Maid." Very little had changed in the labor expected from such a servant. When *Good Housekeeping* presented the ideal "modern" conditions under which a general maid should labor in 1935, her working day still lasted for eleven hours, stretched over thirteen hours. Nonetheless, readers were confidently assured that "[n]owadays, domestic service is becoming more popular again" (*Good Housekeeping* November 1935: 35, January 1935: 42).

Sensational accounts of how to manage without (or between) servants began to find a ready popular audience between the wars, but rarely projected the housewife as a desirable, or even workable, role. When her cook walked out abruptly in 1936, the novelist Mary Wylde chronicled the resulting year of domestic chaos in her regular *Evening Standard* column, later published as book titled *A Housewife in Kensington*. Left alone in the kitchen, she felt emotionally bereft: "Strangely quiet was the house. Clocks ticked all round me, and ashes dropped from the kitchen range." Nonetheless, she produced a meal and "with hands spoiled by peeling potatoes and contact with the greasy meat-tin, and an unusually red countenance, I sat down to dinner." The experiment with cooking for herself was practically feasible, though portrayed as unpleasant. When she finally employed a cook, after a year of very intermittent or incompetent help in the kitchen, Wylde commented: "I feel born again. This last month has seemed ten years of years, and I must try to pick up the threads of life that have been lost in that time" (Wylde 1937: 18–19, 188–9). The housewife identity claimed in the title of her book was surely an ironic gesture and should not be read at face value. Middle-class women still had a deep sense of entitlement, and neither labor-saving, nor hygiene or the "professional" housewife identity was sufficient to dislodge their feeling that they deserved domestic servants.

## POSTWAR HOUSEWIVES?

It has been widely argued that World War Two deeply challenged this middle-class sense of entitlement, alongside its disruption of the domestic service labor market. The census of 1951 showed a decline of 46 percent in the numbers of women in indoor domestic service in England and Wales since 1931 (*Census of England and Wales 1951: General Report* 1958). Krista Cowman and Louise Jackson

have thus concluded that "[w]ith the demise of domestic service at the end of the Second World War, middle-class women were recast as 'housewives' who needed to equip themselves with both the technologies and skills associated with a newly branded 'domestic science'" (Cowman and Jackson 2005: 171). As better-paid, higher-status employment became available during and after the war, the numbers working in domestic service became very small. The school leaving age had risen to fifteen in 1947, and many more employment opportunities were open to young women. The private domestic servants who continued to be employed in postwar decades tended to be older, and far more likely to be non-residential and part-time—in other words, to work as casual "chars" or cleaners. The numbers of chars recorded in the census, which almost certainly underestimated the total numbers working in this mostly informal sector, suggests a large expansion between 1901 and 1911, when the numbers of chars quadrupled to reach around 126,000, and another rise in numbers between 1931 and 1951, when numbers reached over 215,000 (Aiken 2002: 162). Is this the historical point at which, as so many have argued, the housewife became the dominant identity for indigenous middle-class married women?[7]

The postwar advice literature that outlined ideas of "modern living" equivocated about domestic service. Henry Dalton Clifford's 1963 *Houses for Today*, for example, seemed to ally itself to a servantless modernity:

> The housemaid has been superseded by mechanical and electrical devices. Instead of a cook the lady of the house presides in the kitchen. We have almost done away with coal fires and all the dust, soot, smoke, ash, draughts, labour and fire-hazard that went with them. We no longer need a separate room for every domestic activity—a dining-room, sitting-room, drawing-room, library, breakfast room, study and boudoir. With no servants to spy on us, and with clean automatic heating systems to keep every corner of the house at a comfortable temperature, we can, if we want to, have one large all-purpose living room … (Clifford 1963: 3)

Clifford was a regular writer for *Country Life* and a supporter of radical and novel modes for living. Yet whatever his intentions, domestic service continued to shape the houses he described. Devices such as the fold-down table were proposed for "a family house," designed to offer two folding flaps on either side of a serving hatch. This offered the family a divided dining space, with "children and their nurse on the kitchen side and the parents in the dining-room." "Staff quarters" and "maid's bedrooms" pervaded the descriptions of Clifford's well-heeled homes (1963: 12–13, 109). A pattern in postwar texts emerged, where a polemical statement of "modern living" foregrounded the

departure of domestic servants as the primary shift of modernity, only to have this contradicted by the detail of the designs and descriptions of actual living arrangements. "These servantless days" was a repeated cliché of the 1950s and 1960s, used to usher in a discussion of any domestic or family item in popular literature.

In the experiences of the less affluent, beyond the pages of the color supplements and design books, servantless middle-class homes were becoming a reality. Manuals such as the 1949 *How to Run Your Home without Help* had finally began to give details of the tasks that had been termed "rough"—the author talks of how to wash nappies for example, and how to iron and do laundry (Smallshaw 2005[1949]). But those without regular domestic help were still seen as unusual and rarely presented a positive picture of the situation. One member of a small national correspondence club, using the pen name "Accidia," described her domestic situation in 1951: "People gasp on learning that I have five children and wonder how on earth I manage. Clearly they envisage either an efficient squad of family retainers or complete squalor. Actually we have neither. Two mornings a week a 22-year-old girl comes up from the village and lays about her with relative efficiency … for the rest of the week I 'do' for myself." Despite her domestic assistance, she identified as a housewife, and found it an unrewarding role. In 1955, she acknowledged that "[m]y own life at the moment seems a dull waste, a vale of (unshed) tears, an empty vessel, a froth of frustration … I am bored, bored, BORED" (Bailey 2007: 44–5, 51–2; emphasis in the original).

The frustration of women like "Accidia" was exacerbated by the cultural presentation of middle-class domestic life as leisured. The middle-class families presented by the media—the Dales of the hugely popular BBC radio series *Mrs Dale's Diary* (1948–69) and the Conover family on BBC television (1949–50) both employed domestic workers, a char and a cook, respectively. Servant-keeping was still being presented, and interpreted, as central to middle-class femininity, as Margaret Norton's *Portrait of a Daily Help* illustrated (Norton 1962). *Housewife*, a glossy women's magazine of the 1950s and 1960s, still referred commonly to employing "helps," addressed itself to "the business girl or wife with a job" or even the "single-handed cook hostess." It included a long-running cartoon depicting a char, termed "The Treasure," suggesting continuities with earlier traditions of domestic service humor (Delap 2010). When one reader wrote of her hatred of housework in 1957, another reader glibly advised her to get a job and employ "domestic help" for a couple of hours each day. *The Spectator*'s consumer column noted in 1960 that "everyone has—or is looking for—a 'little man' or a 'little woman' round the corner to do odd jobs at reasonable prices" (Robertson 1960: 262). Though *The Spectator* referred gloomily to "these servantless, family-divided days," domestic help agencies such as Domestics Unlimited or Universal Aunts were repeatedly reviewed in its pages alongside

discussions of the class status of au pairs in the early to mid-1960s (Robertson 1962, 1966; *The Spectator* 1965). The idealized housewife that dominates popular memory of the 1950s seems curiously hard to find, and the voices expressing boredom and frustration at housework are by no means silenced within these sources.

Advertisers still exploited the middle-class sense of entitlement and loss that was associated with being "servantless." An advertisement for oil-fired domestic appliances in *The Times* in 1959 pictured a harassed housewife, captioned: "You—Maid of all Work. Cooking. Cleaning. Laying the fires. Encouraging them with sheets of *The Times*. Rushing back to see to the boiler. Servantless. And bored!" (*The Times* 1959: 9). The housewife did not appear as a settled identity willingly embraced by women in the 1950s and 1960s, but rather as a problematic subject position into which women from formerly servant-keeping families had been forced. Privileged women were still being presented with images of themselves as "servantless" or "a maid-of-all-work," indicating an acute and unresolved awareness of what one earlier reformer had termed "the holes left by the departed Mary-Ann" (Brereton 1913: 17). Professional women were still fantasizing about domestic help, though they may have realized it to be unrealistic. *Good Housekeeping* quoted a professional working woman in 1969 as claiming: "I'd trade in my vote if I thought I could get a good, old-fashioned nanny who would also cook and wash-up," though the editor commented that such a desire was "pie-in-the-sky" (Passingham 1969: 69). Even so, *The Times* in 1970 was still struggling with nomenclature, terming the professional woman who cooked at home "the working cook housewife," who might devote herself to what were *still* called "servantless dishes" (*The Times* 1970: 1).

Middle-class women were also embracing identities that were less than competent. One 1958 guide was titled *Halving Your Housework: A Practical Guide for Women Who Hate Doing it*, and talked of "cultivating laziness" (Lovell 1958). The popular journalist Katharine Whitehorn advocated the servantless life, and produced a highly successful book in 1961, titled *Cooking in a Bedsitter, or Kitchen in the Corner*, aimed at those she termed "the domestically incompetent" or "sluts" (Whitehorn 1963). Whitehorn actively presented herself as epitomizing the postwar democratic blurring of "above and below stairs"; she commented in 1960: "When I am in luck I have a char; when out of luck I have occasionally *been* a char." Yet her autobiography reveals the extent of her own reliance upon domestic help; she had a daily cleaner, working from 10 am to 3 pm, when still childless. After the arrival of her two sons, she variously obtained the help of an Austrian refugee, a daily "help," and some residential "mother's helps" (Whitehorn 2007: 152). We cannot write servant-keeping too readily out of her life trajectory; "slut" was still an identity made sustainable by paid domestic help.

The decline of domestic service as a reference point in establishing middle-class identities was far slower than the actual decline of servants in British households, and this long cultural afterlife made the housewife identity relatively unsuccessful amongst middle-class or educated women in the two decades after World War Two.[8] There is much less evidence recording the reactions of young workers to the postwar unresolved debates around domestic service. As the employment of servants declined to a small minority of very rich households, it took on a more glamorous aspect that some hoped would make it a career of choice. One domestic employment agency produced a pamphlet titled "Service in the Sixties," which promised "the fascination of seeing in real life the people you have read about in the newspapers and seen on the television" (*The Time*s March 26, 1963). The *Daily Herald* noted in 1962 that more school leavers in Nottingham were inquiring about domestic service than factory work, and the state-funded domestic training body, the National Institute of Houseworkers (NIH), reported waiting lists for its training courses in the 1960s (*Daily Herald* May 19, 1962). But there is little to suggest that domestic work became widely attractive. Most NIH graduates went into institutional work in hotels and schools. Private domestic employment in the 1960s did not deliver on its promise of glamour; it largely failed to attract young British workers and was dominated by migrant workers from Europe.

## CONCLUSIONS

The decades of the mid-twentieth century are normally associated with a conservative, domestically oriented gender order that saw large numbers of women identify as housewives in a shift that has been argued to transcend class identities. As one commentator put it in 1921: "there are no differences worth taking into consideration between classes, so strong are the cardinal points of resemblance between one woman and another when marriage and motherhood are concerned" (Lovat 1921). Historians have perhaps taken this kind of claim at face value and, as Judy Giles has argued, need a more class-nuanced account of the making of the "housewife." Giles has sensitively charted the relationship working-class women sustained to domesticity, and situates their investment in housewifery as a contribution to "modernity" (Giles 2004: 63, 96). Yet while it is clear that to speak as a housewife had its political uses, particularly in the "austerity years" after the Second World War, it was far from being deeply internalized in the subjectivities of privileged and educated women, and was always bolstered in practice by the extensive employment of daily domestic workers. The attempts made to argue for housework as a dignified, rewarding occupation of national significance only rarely resonated with middle-class women. They aspired to careers and opportunities for self-development in other realms, though their professional and intellectual identities were achieved in

precarious ways (Cowman and Jackson 2005). Their sense of civic or professional contribution displaced mistresshood as a core feature of middle-class femininity, but was often still premised on employing domestic workers.

The image of a more private, intimate twentieth-century "home," in which domestic labor was either willingly undertaken as a form of dignified, pleasurable care, or was lightened by technology, has been closely associated with that slippery and mobile concept, "modernity." Domestic service has been read by commentators and historians as antithetical to "modernity," predominantly figured as part of a different historical epoch—sometimes seen as "Victorian," and more often as feudal, and thus incapable of being modernized. Feudalism was a widely used metaphor in the twentieth century for the master–servant relationship—and was intended to indicate the changed tenor of the twentieth century. Domestic service has thus been seen as inevitably displaced by more progressive forms of modern domesticity (see, for example, Coser 1973). This narrative struggles to make sense of the continuing employment of cleaners, chars, and "helps" after World War Two, and the dramatic rise of domestic employment during and after the 1980s, as nannies, cleaners, au pairs, gardeners, and so on became increasingly present in British homes.[9] A re-visioning of twentieth-century domesticity, however, can shed light on how servant-keeping was so easily reestablished. The advice literature, government reports, comic memoirs, and debates press reviewed above suggest that there had been nothing inevitable about the rise of the "modern" private domestic realm in the mid-twentieth century. Instead, there was a great deal of continuity in how the affluent or privileged aspired to organize their homes. During the 1980s and 1990s, the rise of material inequalities in Britain, the deregulated labor market, the mobility of labor and the growing numbers of married women in full-time employment all made for the renewal of what had been mistakenly heralded a socially obsolete institution.

The association of domestic service with feudal anachronism fails to acknowledge the extent to which domestic service was never fully displaced from visions of "homes" in the twentieth century. Even in the postwar decades when the numbers employed in private domestic service were very low, domestic designs, advice literature, and the media fueled fantasies amongst middle-class householders that they were still entitled to domestic assistance. Furthermore, many continued to receive it through the unobtrusive employment of cleaners and chars, often of migrant status. In charting middle-class domesticities, "modernity" seems conceptually unhelpful and too easily used to draw sharp distinctions between "old" and "new" forms of domesticity. Instead, this article has argued that servant-keeping, newly cast in more "progressive" or egalitarian forms such as "au-pairing," continued to undermine and problematize the housewife identity for middle-class women.

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## NOTES

1. In this literature, housework is understood as the imposition of a spatial and material order, the "sorting" of the domestic realm, and is a work that goes beyond practical human needs for shelter, nutrition, and warmth, to embody ideas of belonging, care, and social hierarchy. Comfort and cleanliness are thus read as highly historically and culturally specific. See Davidoff (1973: 90), Douglas (2002), and Palmer (1989).
2. The numbers of women entering service varied according to regional labor markets. In 1881, one in nine of the entire workforce in Bath, both male and female, was employed in service. In London, the equivalent ratio was one in fifteen, whereas only one in thirty was a servant in textile-dominated Lancashire (Jackson 1991: 344–5).
3. A substantial minority of middle-class homes deployed the domestic labor of wives and daughters, though normally with the employment of daily chars or casual help for the dirtier "rough" tasks (Schwarz 1999). Lynn Jamieson's research suggests that "doing for oneself'" was also a widespread practice in middle-class Scotland (Jamieson 1986). It is clear that being servantless was regionally uneven and particularly high in areas where working-class women had access to industrial work.
4. Although some forms of domestic work began to be newly undertaken by men, gender divides within domestic labor were largely cemented by the developing identity of "housewife." Indeed, John Tosh influentially argued that middle-class late Victorian and Edwardian men became disenchanted with the confined nature of domesticity, and turned to real or fantasized realms of "adventure" at the same moment that "housewife" became a more powerful lower-middle-class identity (Tosh 1999).
5. On the middle-class adoption of more formal social rituals, see Davidoff (1973).
6. Around 41 percent of all British women in employment were domestic servants in 1891, but this had dropped to around 24 percent by the 1931 census. However, this still amounted to around 8 percent of the entire workforce, and at 1.6 million, the number of domestic servants still dwarfed the 0.8 million mostly young women working as shop assistants.

7. I am drawing here on Wendy Webster's concept of indigenous women; her work on the discourses of ethnicity associated with British homes reminds us of the alternative ways in which migrant women might use or transform these concepts of domesticity (Webster 1998). Irish servants were overrepresented among chars and cleaners, and particularly predominated in and around London (Walter 2004).
8. As Pat Thane's work on Girton College graduates suggests, many educated women did not marry, or remained childless within marriage, and though they faced external constraints in the labor market, were keen to pursue careers. Those graduating after the First World War aspired to combine paid employment with domestic responsibilities and rarely identified in any conventional sense as housewives (Thane 2004).
9. There was a startling resurgence of private domestic service during the 1980s, with an estimated £524 million being spent on cooks, cleaners, gardeners, and childcarers by the mid-1980s. This had risen to an estimated £4 billion by 1997, with agencies reporting that demand for such workers outstripped supply (Cox 2006; Gregson and Lowe 1994).

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